Lafayette Historical Society NEWS
Enlightening Our Community

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Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

Planters Dock: Waterfalls, Tikis, and Cantonese Feasts

There was a time when you could drive up the winding hill above the Tunnel Strip in Lafayette and suddenly feel like you'd landed in the South Pacific. Palm fronds rustled in the breeze, waterfalls tumbled beside tiki statues, and the smell of sweet and savory spices drifted into the valley below.

Every little kid sitting in the back seat of their parent's car would look out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of that magical waterfall tumbling down the hill and the tiki gods lining the driveway. To them, it looked like another world—mysterious, tropical, and full of adventure.

This was Planters Dock, a dreamlike outpost of Polynesian fantasy and Cantonese cuisine, perched high above town.

Opened in the late 1940s by Herbert Howard Jr., Planters Dock was a restaurant unlike anything Lafayette had ever seen. The building itself was a full-blown replica of a Samoan trading post, complete with bamboo details, nets, boats, and a driveway lined with carved stone tikis. It was the kind of place that made you think of Englishmen in toupees, with a gin and bitters on the veranda, and a soft ocean breeze carrying the scent of coconut and spice. Some locals compared it to a scene from *Rain*, the play made famous by Jeanne Eagels, set in the sultry tropics of the South Pacific.

But Planters Dock wasn't just about atmosphere—it was about flavor. Behind its spotless stainless-steel kitchen doors worked the talented chef Bill Wong and his team, including the ever-charming Hart Chan. Their dishes, rooted in traditional Cantonese cooking

passed down through generations, dazzled diners with bold combinations of pork, duck, shrimp, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, and handmade noodles—all wrapped in sauces that were sweet, sour, spicy—and unforgettable.

The menu was as exotic and generous as the setting. A Chinese Dinner for Two might include Jar Har (crispy fried prawns), Chow Yuk, Hun Yun Gai Ding, Moo Goo Mein, wine, dessert, and Chinese tea—all for $2.50 per person. Or you could upgrade to the Duck Dinner—starting with soup, followed by Chow Yuk, Jar Har, roast duck, Chow Fan, dessert, and tea—for just $3.00.

For guests who preferred something closer to home, Planters Dock Specials offered American-style fare with just as much flair. The menu featured:

- **Squab Dinner – $3.50**
- **Spare Rib Dinner – $2.75**
- **Steak Dinner – $3.75**
- **Lamb Chop Dinner – $3.00**
- **Fried Chicken – $2.50**
- **Special Cut Thick Steak with Mushroom Sauce – $4.75**

Each of these fantastic meals came with salad, vegetables, hot rolls, coffee, tea or milk, and dessert.

Children were treated like royalty, each one served a pastel-hued Pink Cow drink. And once you ordered, you could eat to your heart's content—helpings were unlimited.

Planters Dock closed its doors in 1953, its island dream fading like a mirage. But the building still stands today, now part of Temple Isaiah. If you know where to look, you can still glimpse traces of its exotic past—a tilt of the roofline, a small remnant of the waterfall—and imagine a time when Lafayette offered a ticket to the tropics, no passport required.

<u>From the Planters Dock Kitchen: JAR HAR (Crispy Fried Prawns)</u>

A house specialty, these crispy golden prawns were a crowd favorite—served hot with a sharp mustard dip.

Ingredients:

- **Extra-large prawns, cleaned**
- **¾ tsp baking soda**
- **1 tsp sugar**
- **1 cup soy bean flour**
- **1 cup cake flour**
- **1 cup water**
- **2 eggs**

To Make the Batter: Sift dry ingredients. Add slightly beaten eggs and water, stirring until it reaches pancake batter consistency. Roll prawns in the batter and fry in deep fat until brown and crisp.

Dipping Sauce:

- **Imported English mustard**
- **Stale beer**
- **A small amount of oil**

Liquefy the mustard with beer and oil until smooth and zesty.

Bon appétit!

++*John Kenn*ett

Jack Marchant: Building Lafayette from the Ground Up

Based from a Lafayette Society interview by Oliver Hamlin, November 30, 1984

When people talk about what built Lafayette, they often mention the rolling hills, the excellent schools, and the enduring sense of community. But just as essential are the people who quite literally built the town. Few shaped Lafayette's landscape and identity more than Jack Marchant—a builder, civic leader, and visionary whose imprint can still be seen in the neighborhoods, parks, and institutions that define the city today.

Jack Marchant built more than 2,000 homes in Lafayette and surrounding areas, in developments like Happy Valley Dell, Peardale Estates, Silver Springs, Silver Dell, and Blackhawk in Springhill Valley. Known for their quality and charm, Marchant homes reflected a distinctive blend of colonial and California ranch styles. "We always tried to do our best," Jack once said. "We were always proud and glad to hear good things about the resale of Marchant homes."

Lafayette offered something different—room to grow, room to build, and the kind of close-knit community that Jack and his wife, Esther, would call home for the rest of their lives. They first lived with their two sons, Donny and Johnny, in a house Jack built on McGraw Lane, and later settled into their forever home on Meadowlark Court.

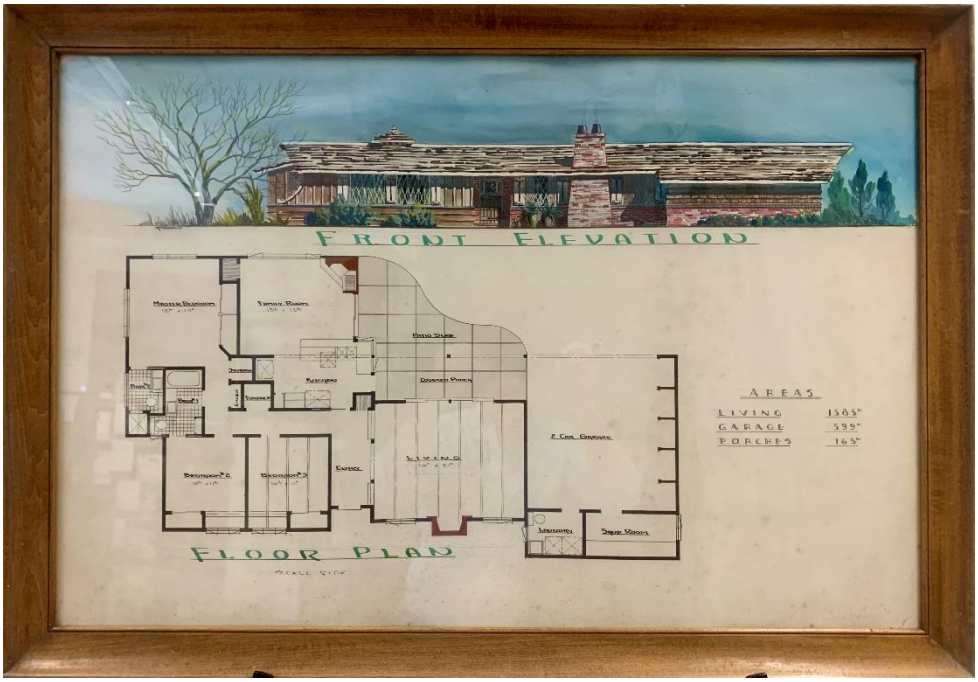
But Jack wasn't just a builder of houses—he was a builder of community. He served on the board of Lafayette Federal Savings and Loan (later Cal Fed, now Citibank), helped found the local Rotary Club, and in 1968, was elected to Lafayette's first City Council. Four years earlier, in recognition of his civic service, he was named Lafayette Man of the Year.

He and Esther were also central to Lafayette's beautification efforts. As members of the volunteer-led Lafayette Design Project, they championed initiatives like the renovation of Plaza Park and the removal of overhead utility lines downtown. "Esther was on the group called the Lafayette Design Project, and we had such a time getting the PG&E and telephone wires down in the middle of town."

Jack's roots in construction ran deep. Born in Havana, Cuba, and raised in Berkeley, he graduated from University High School and earned an AB degree from UC Berkeley. In the early 1930s, he and his younger brother Paul began building homes under the name Marchant Brothers. "We worked up in Kensington near Berkeley for quite a while before the war," Jack recalled. "I think we built about 90 houses up there."

World War II interrupted their business. Paul joined the Army Engineers, while Jack served overseas with the Maritime Service. After returning home, Jack taught school for a few years before returning to construction. In 1950, the brothers formed Marchant Construction Company and briefly partnered with Don Lawrie under the name Marchant & Lawrie.

They brought a methodical but creative approach to development—carefully estimating land costs, potential lot yield, and overall feasibility before moving forward. They favored large parcels that allowed for thoughtful, spacious planning. Jack's architectural inspiration came largely from books on early American homes. "I just kind of fell in love with that colonial style," he said. Though they occasionally built contemporaries, the California colonial ranch became his hallmark.



The brothers 'collaboration ended in tragedy. Paul was killed in a plane crash near Bishop while scouting land during a storm. "My brother, Paul, had a very tragic ending," Jack said. "It was a terrible loss."

Even after Paul's death, Jack continued to build, often working with longtime collaborators like local architect Hirsch Morton, who had started as a draftsman under Marchant before becoming a respected designer in his own right.

Jack's contributions went far beyond homebuilding. He served on the board of the Mt. Diablo Therapy Center in Pleasant Hill and personally helped secure concrete for its construction by writing directly to industrialist Henry Kaiser. "Mr. Kaiser called me back and said he would furnish ALL the concrete we needed for that project, and I have never forgotten that." He also sold land on Moraga Boulevard for the creation of the Chateau Lafayette senior housing complex—a project that continues to serve the community today and maintains a long waiting list. "We owned a big bunch of property on Moraga

Boulevard," Jack said. "We still own a lot of it except what we sold to the Senior Citizens project." Jack's legacy can be felt not only in the physical infrastructure he helped create but in the civic spirit he helped foster. His leadership helped guide Lafayette through its transition from a rural outpost to an incorporated city, and his vision—practical, generous, and community-minded—continues to echo through its streets.

As he put it, "Lafayette's incorporation was a good experience. Originally the first council acted as both the Planning Commission and the City Council... and that was a big step in the right direction."

It's hard to drive through Lafayette today without seeing the world Jack Marchant helped build—one carefully laid foundation at a time.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2026

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

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